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A SKETCH OF HIS LIFE AND TEACHINGS



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# NAMDEV

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 THE subject of this sketch is one of the two great poets of Maharashtra; the first to give impassioned and poetic expression to the doctrines of the Vaishnava faith. Born in the fourteenth century, some decades after the Brahmin reformer Dnyandev whose intrepid life and utterances had caused a great national and religious awakening, he sang in pure and devout strains of the love of God and the need of attaining Him. The value of Namdev's life and poetry cannot be better judged than by the reverence and love with which he was looked upon in latter days, when the movement had spread through the whole nation and a host of saints and poets arose to testify to its power. Tukaram called himself the spiritual disciple of Namdev and was, it appears, chiefly guided in his devotion and poetry by the influence of Namdev's works. In the joyous refrains of the simple people

who daily go on pilgrimage to Pandharpur, Tukaram's name is ever cheerfully joined with that of his illustrious predecessor.

Before narrating the story of Namdev's life, it behoves us to say something about the origin and history of the shrine of Pandharpur in which city Namdev was born. It was Namdev's life and poetry, more than anything else, that linked the name and cult of Vithoba irrevocably with the rising religion of Maharashtra.

#### THE SHRINE OF PANDHARPUR

The shrine and city of Pandharpur which were the chief and loved resort of the mystics and poets of mediæval Maharashtra are situated on the banks of the Bhima river (also called Chandrabhaga), a tributary of the Krishna. The origin of the shrine is lost to us. That it existed and was well known as the shrine of Vishnu even so early as the thirteenth century is borne out by a few inscriptions. The first in date is a copper-plate grant by one Mallisetti, a general of the Yadava king, dated 1249 A.D., in which it is mentioned that the

general made a grant of a village in the Pundarikakshetra in the presence of Vishnu. The next bears the date 1270 A.D. It says that Bhanu, son of Kesava, celebrated an Aptoryama sacrifice in the city in consequence of which all the gods and Panduranga were delighted. From these it is clear that the shrine was considered and revered as that of Vishnu. But how Vishnu came to have the name *Vittal* is a matter of discussion among Marathi scholars. Sir R. G. Bhandarkar is of opinion that the word *Vittal* is made up of *Vittu* and *la*, the former being a Canarese form of the Sanskrit name *Vishnu*, while *la* is a suffix indicating tenderness or affection. That *Vittu* in Canarese is a corruption of the Sanskrit *Vishnu* can be accepted with certainty, as we find it occurring in the names of some of the kings of the Hoysala dynasty such as Bittideva, etc. Others derive the word from *Vita*, meaning "a brick" in the Marathi language, and say that that name was given because *Vittal* stands on a brick pedestal. Whatever may be the derivation of the word,

there is no doubt that the image stood for Vishnu and was as such worshipped by the people. In latter days, Vittal was identified with Krishna, the husband of Rukmini (Rakhmai in Marathi), and his worship became the joy and faith of Maharashtra.

It has been surmised by some that the image and shrine of Vithoba, prior to the period they came to represent Vishnu, might have been some image and chaitya of Buddha. Says Mr. H. G. Rawlinson, "Who this Vithoba or Vittala originally was, has been the subject of much learned, and for the most part fruitless, discussion. One thing at least is certain. Before his shrine, as before that of his brother at Puri, all castes are equal, and the haughty Brahmin and humble Sudra stand on the same footing. Perhaps Vithoba has borrowed some of his attributes from the gentle Buddha whose deserted halls at Karla and elsewhere testify to his former power in the land. Perhaps he is even Gautama himself—*quantum mutatis ab illo*—transformed by long centuries of uncritical devotion."

The accredited legend, however, is as follows : One Pandalika was much attached to his parents and spent his life in ministering to them and attending on them day and night. Once Rukmini, the spouse of Krishna, fell out with him, and, leaving Dwaraka, betook herself to the woods near Pandharpur where Pandalika and his parents were living. Krishna went in search of Rukmini and during his journey met Pandalika and his parents. Pandalika, not heeding the arrival of the divine Krishna, threw down a few bricks for Krishna to stand upon and went on with his filial ministrations. The ministrations over, he turned to Krishna and offered him his worship. God Krishna was exceedingly pleased with Pandalika's filial devotion and, at the latter's request, as a reward for his devotion, made his temple at the place where he stood. Rukmini too came and joined him. Thus arose the temple and image of Vithoba at Pandharpur. As Sir R. G. Bhandarkar suggests, this legend perhaps testifies to the fact that Pandalika, or some one of his name, first



carried to, and preached in, Maharashtra the Vaishnavite religion which was forming and spreading in North India in the early centuries of the Christian era.

It may be mentioned that the Krishna worshipped as Vittoba is Krishna the husband of Rukmini, not Krishna the lover of Radha. The aspect of Krishna-myth that engrossed the heart of Northern India was that of Krishna as adored by Radha and the Gopis. It is this face of the myth that is prominent in the religions of Vallabha and Chaitanya. The religion of the latter, if anything, is really more ardent and soul-engrossing than that of the Maratha saints. The ardour and spiritual yearning, that find expression in the discourses of Chaitanya, the *Prem Sagar* and the Pahari paintings, are greater than anything similar that we find elsewhere in mediæval India. In latter days, however, in Rajasthan and in Bengal, religion and worship came to be mixed up with sensuous and worldly doings: but little of that debasement can be laid at the door of religion. It may be, as Sir

Bhandarkar remarks, that the Vishnu-faith of Maharashtra was "more sober and purer," but the strength and cause of it lay not in the form of Krishna-myth that the saints chose to glorify, but in the qualities, the lives and the utterances of the poets and saints themselves. The Vaishnavite preachers of other provinces, partly owing perhaps to their training and local traditions, partly owing to the circumstances under which the new faith reached them, laid more insistence on study and Shastric worship and inculcated implicit loyalty and devotion to the guru. The schools they founded became therefore more theologic and priest-ridden. The Maratha saints, while addressing their message to the great heart of the people, laid great insistence on the training and virtues of the heart: little trammelled by ancient theology and modes of thought, the Maratha movement became more protestant and humanitarian in character. The theologic schools of the North gained in poetry and sectarian strength; while the movement in Maharashtra became rational and humanitarian.

Whatever be the origin of Vithoba, whatever be the theological antecedents of which he was born, he soon became the God and national deity of Maharashtra. A race of most impassioned mystics and poets and of noble saints found in him and his name the heart and symbol of their faith. There was little of idolatry or anthropomorphism in that devotion. Full of strong emotion, of a great sincerity and faith, it was a personal religion rendered to a living God. It was no rude idol they worshipped, but One whom they feel they cannot comprehend but whom by the very strength and intensity of their desire they have realised more than any that professed more rational worship.

#### NAMDEV'S BIRTH AND PARENTAGE

Namdev came of a family belonging to the tailor caste. His ancestors originally lived at Narasivamani, situated near Karhad, Satara District, now known as Bhaya-Narasingpur or Kolem-Narasingpur. His parents, Dama Set and Gona Bai, however, left Narasivamani and emigrated to Pandharpur where the saint-poet

was born. Dama Set led a religious life at Pandharpur maintaining himself and his family by tailoring and a little trade in clothes. Legend tells us that Namdev was not "born" but "found" by Dama Set floating in a stream, by the grace of Vittal. Be the legend as it may, Dama Set and Gona Bai brought up the child with great affection and love.

Even as a child, Namdev seems to have been of a devout and spiritual turn of mind. An interesting and curious legend is told which runs thus. Dama Set used every day to visit the shrine of Vittoba and worship him with fruits or rice or the like materials of worship. Once Dama Set being absent at a neighbouring village on business, Gona Bai gave the materials of worship to Namdev and asked him to go and offer them to Vittal. Namdev went, and, placing the food before the image, prayed in true child-like faith, that Vittoba do eat the same. Finding the image silent, the child-worshipper burst into tears. At last, we are told, the child's simple faith and

devotion were so compelling that the Deity, in order to please him, actually ate the offering.

#### MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE

As Namdev grew into youth, his parents got him married to a maiden of their caste named Rajai. He seems to have lived lovingly with her and two children were born to them, a son and a daughter. Though married and father of a family, Namdev grew more and more unworldly and ascetic in disposition. Ever visiting the shrine or attending religious assemblies, or exercising himself in song and devout exercises, he rarely crossed the threshold of his house. His parents often sought after him and entreated him to give up his devotions and pursue the family trade. They were themselves, they said, growing old and could not work. But neither their entreaties nor even their helpless and aged condition could turn the thoughts of Namdev. Full of reverence and affection for his parents, kind to all beings even to a fault, he could not find it in his mind to engage in any secular task, but went and spent himself in devotion and

spiritual exercises in the shrine of Vittoba. Namdev's disregard and neglect seem to have brought poverty and discord into his household, though perhaps they were never so acute as we read in the life of that other great mystic, Tukaram, the doleful sage of Dehu.

Once, we are told, the aged Gona Bai, stung by her son's neglect of the household and the consequent poverty, repaired to the shrine of Vittoba, and, there standing before His image, charged Him thus: "My son whose upbringing cost me so much trouble and anxiety is now a slave of Thee. He lives forever in Thy Temple; he has neglected his trade; his parents, wife and child he has ruined. You have enticed him away from world and honour. My family is in ruin. Is this Thy vaunted Divine Mercy? Standing on Thy brick pedestal, O God of Illusion, Thou causest a tragedy to be enacted in every home!" Vittoba, the legend continues, secretly put on the guise of a merchant and went and deposited some money and treasure in the house of Namdev, before Gona Bai returned home.

from the temple. Namdev, as might be expected, on arriving home, took hold of the treasure and swiftly distributed it among Brahmins and mendicants.

The chief occupation of Namdev, during these days consisted in celebrating what are called *bhajans* and *sankirtans*, chantings of prayer and song. Putting on the *tulsi* garland, cymbal in hand, the tailor-youth would go and stand in the courtyard of the Vittoba shrine and long dance and sing. Or when the temple festivals came and pilgrims poured in, the devout youth forgetful of all, even food, would join in their chantings and songs and pass his time in high spiritual revel. Ere long he began to compose songs, and young friends and mystics began to gather round him attracted by his devotion and his songs. His virtues too, his great tenderness, his affection for all, should have endeared him to many. But in that mediæval age, the songs and ecstatic doings of this untutored youth seemed to have struck the minds of the elders and the orthodox with a certain spiritual

*naivete* and daring. A remarkable anecdote is told of how, once when Namdev was seated in the midst of an assembly of devotees, a saintly potter, by name Gora, tapping him on the head, said that he was *kaccha* (half-baked), hinting thereby that he should, in order to perfect his religion, sit at the feet of some guru and learn. Namdev sought after a *guru* and found one in Vishoba Khesar, an ascetic dwelling in the shrine at Mallikarjun.

#### NAMDEV AND VISHOBA KHE SAR

A great change seems to have come over Namdev's life and religious attitude after his initiation and discipleship under Vishoba Khesar. In one of his songs, Namdev tells us that he obtained his knowledge of the True and Living God from the Khesar, and by his influence was led beyond idolatry and the worship of stocks and stones. Vishoba Khesar was a Vedantin and a great opponent of idolatry and perhaps also a Saivite in form. The circumstances under which Namdev is said to have first seen him at the shrine of



Mallikarjun are themselves exceedingly characteristic. The intrepid and selfless Khesar, we are told, lay with his feet touching Siva's emblem and his eyes closed in meditation. The devout youth, Namdev, was staggered at the sight and cried in the ears of the ascetic, "O Swami, why dost thou thus lie with thy feet on the God's image?" The ascetic, waking up, replied, "Fatigue and old age had laid me down. Unconsciously my feet touched the image. You please take my feet and place them where Siva's image is not." Namdev complied, and when he lifted Khesar's feet and placed them in another direction, he found to his astonishment a Siva's image starting up just below where he placed Khesar's feet. Namdev, lifting the feet again, tried another place and yet again another, but wherever he took the feet, he found there an image of Siva starting up. Namdev, struck with the mysterious greatness of the ascetic, fell at his feet and implored him to teach him the secrets of faith. The legend seems to embody the fact that Namdev learnt from

Vishoba Khesar the great truth that God is all-pervading and omniscient and that idolatrous worship would never lead to Him. Namdev returned to Pandharpur filled with new faith and knowledge, and became, as the legend says, *pacca* or full-baked.

#### NAMDEV'S PILGRIMAGES

The next important episode in the life of Namdev is his pilgrimage to the various shrines and holy places of Northern India and Deccan. Mahipathi says that Namdev was accompanied on his pilgrimage by the great reformer Dayandev. There are strong reasons against the truth of such a story. There is some evidence to show, as will be seen in a latter part of this sketch, that Namdev could have flourished only towards the end of the 14th century which is clearly a hundred years after the demise of the great Brahmin reformer Dayandev; and the association of the two is therefore a pure invention of later times.

Namdev's pilgrimage extended as far as Hastinapur and Badrikashram in the north.

His visits to those shrines seemed to have comprised nothing more than the usual routine of worship and prayer: but, on his return journey through Berar, an interesting incident is recorded by Mahipathi to have happened at a place of Saivite pilgrimage, called "Avinda Nagnath. The story is interesting as it agrees well with the gentle and tenderspirit of Namdev and also bears testimony to the easy persecution that befell the reformer or the faithful preacher of those days. Happening to arrive at Avinda Nagnath on the day of *Māha Sivaratri*, Namdev and his fellow-pilgrims bathed and went and worshipped Siva in the shrine. A little time after, Namdev moved by deep devotion took the cymbals in his hands and began to sing and preach. Large numbers of men gathered and sat to hear him. Namdev's words and songs engrossed the hearts of the listeners. "As the sea swells at the sight of the full moon," runs the description of Mahipathi, "so did the hearts of the audience swell with devotion at the words and songs of the Deccan saint." As the preacher and

audience were thus immersed in one stream of devotion and music; the priests and Brahmins of the temple appeared, smeared all over with ashes, beads round their necks, holy water in hand and articles of worship. Seeing the crowded audience that blocked the passage to the inside of the shrine, the Brahmins spoke aloud in angry tones, "Make way, touch us not." The assembled people demurred saying "What is there of pollution here! you may go," But the haughty Brahmins would not, and, approaching Namdev, said "Avaunt! thou wretch! Thy *bhakti* lore has ruined the holy principles of religion. Go behind the shrine and there carry on thy mad dance and song." The words fell like a bolt from the blue. The audience were perturbed and Namdev was struck with grief and sorrow beyond all measure. His thoughts instantly turned to the shrine of his kind and gracious Vittal where there was none high or low and where song and prayer were never despised. Though inwardly grieved, he moved with his audience, according to the bidding of the

Brahmins, to the western courtyard of the temple, and there continued his songs and preaching. To the surprise of all present and of the Brahmins in question, the image and temple suddenly turned west, in order, it is said, to please and honour Namdev; and it is said that to this day the Siva temple at Avinda Nagnath remains facing the west (generally Hindu temples face the east). His pilgrimages over, Namdev returned to Pandharpur and spent his life at the feet and in the presence of, his beloved Vittoba.

#### NAMDEV'S LATTER LIFE

His discipleship under Vishoba Khesar and his pilgrimage apart, there are no other important episodes recorded in the life of Namdev as written by Mahipathi. One or two incidents, however, may be mentioned. After his return to Pandharpur, Namdev, in the usual manner of the Hindus after they finish a pilgrimage, prepared to feed a large number of Brahmins and holy men. Vittoba himself, it is said, helped Namdev with the necessary provisions and acted as

the host. The Brahmins were all well fed and, pleased with the entertainment given to them, invoked the blessings of God on Namdev and the host. But finding to their surprise that Namdev was a Sudra and that the host ate with him, the Brahmins raised an uproar and said that a purification was necessary. The host, it is said, then disclosing his Divine attributes, preached to them on the nature of true religion and told them that among those who worshipped Him in faith and devotion there was no distinction of caste or birth.

Another incident may be referred to, as it throws some light on the possible age of Namdev, and also for the interesting testimony it bears to the fact that Namdev's fame as a devotee and man of religion was established even in his own life-time. A rich Brahmin of Bidar wished to celebrate some festivals in honour of Vittoba in his native town in fulfilment of some vow of his. He came and invited the Pandharpur saint and poet to come and assist him in the celebrations. Namdev and his friends, taking their *bhajan* instruments,

followed the Brahmin. As they entered the Mussalman capital singing and chanting, the servants of the Mahomedan governor came and stopped them and inquired them what they did. Namdev replied that he and his followers were but religious pilgrims chanting and singing God's name; and their mission was one of devotion and peace. The Mahomedan officers, however, listened not, but surrounded them, and led them like captives to the door of their governor's palace. The governor, taking the pilgrims to be pretenders and infidels, had a cow slaughtered in their presence and, addressing Namdev, asked him to bring it back to life. Namdev, moved to tears, sat down in prayer and, at last, it is said, Vittal brought the cow back to life and vindicated the piety and faith of his adherents.

#### NAMDEV'S AGE

The reference in this and other minor stories in Namdev's life to Mahomedan persecution, and the reference in one of his poems also to a destruction of idols by the Turks, seem to show that Namdev should

have flourished some time after the advent of the Mahomedans into the Deccan. The first inroad and establishment of the Mahomedan power in the Deccan took place in the beginning of the 14th century A.D. It may also be said that we find no reference to the Mahomedans in Mahipathi's life of Dnyandev. Another fact too, according to Sir Bhandarkar, points the same way. The strong dislike of idolatry which is attributed to Vishoba Khesar, and which, through him according to the story and one of Namdev's own poems, descended to Namdev himself, must to some extent have been the result of Mahomedan influence. A third factor in determining the period of Namdev is found in the fact that, while Dnyandev's style is highly archaic, Namdev's is more modern. From these, it may be safely inferred that Namdev should have flourished in the latter part of the 14th century (1370—1440 A. D. may, for the present, be taken as provisional dates), and the date 1270 A. D. (Saka 1192), which is traditionally given as the date of Namdev's birth should be



considered as antedated by at least one hundred years.

#### NAMDEV'S FELLOW-MYSTICS AND DISCIPLES

In the poetic biography of Namdev written by Mahipathi, a number of  $\frac{3}{4}$  most lovable mystics and saints appear who all seem to have lived in the time of Namdev and on terms of spiritual comradeship with him. How many of these saints, or which of them were really contemporary, we have no means of judging apart from the writings of Mahipathi himself. But their lives and character and the part they play in the life of Namdev are in themselves so interesting and full of beauty that we cannot pass over them in silence.

#### JANI

Jani, child-poet and mystic, was the offspring of some poor parents. Once the latter coming on pilgrimage to Pandharpur with their daughter, the young girl, barely seven years old, moved by some strange devotion and mystic love at the sight of Vittoba, chose to remain in His city. The parents urged her long to follow them back to their home but

she refused and was left at Pandharpur. The little girl all alone lived in the city, a houseless devotee worshipping Vittoba. One day she fell under the notice of Namdev, and the saint, struck with the girl's precocious God-love and courage, took her to his home and giving her unto the hands of Gona Bai bade her look after the girl and nourish her. Gona Bai, with a true mother's heart, took the stranger-girl into her household, set her to some household work and cherished her lovingly. The little girl-devotee, we read, lived happily in Namdev's house, partaking in his *bhajans* and songs and assisting in the household work.

Jani, true devotion's child, was also a poetess. Small beautiful songs of hers, telling of God and His Love, are still current and highly popular throughout the Deccan. They are sung by the Marathi woman as she draws water from the village-well or sits at the grinding-stone, and by the hillman tending the flock on the hills. Poet and devotee of Vittoba as she was, Jani never gave up her

place in Namdev's household, and it was from out of her common life, a life of toil and service, that she sang forth her rapturous lyrics of love and devotion. A most beautiful anecdote is told of how, once, when Jani was grinding at the stone, Vittoba himself came to assist her in her heavy task. The shrewd Gona Bai, thinking that Jani had called in somebody to assist her for wages, fell to rebuking her; when to her surprise she found God Himself seated along with Jani and helping her in her toil. Of Jani's latter life, of how it ended, we know no more than in the case of the lives of many another mystic and devotee. She lived perhaps for a long time under the kind protection and spiritual fellowship of Namdev, and, after a life of household toil and religious devotion, closed her days in the city of Vittoba.

#### RAKHA

Another character that figures in the life of Namdev is the pious and ascetic Rakha. In an age of gentle and pious souls, Rakha was the most pious and gentle. He was by birth a potter and lived in the city of Pandharpur with his

wife named Banga and a daughter. Once he had made a number of new pots and kept them for baking. A cat laid its young in one of them. Rakha, unconscious of the same, took down all the pots and placed them in the fire to be baked. A little time hence the mother cat came, and, missing its young, loudly began to scream. Rakha was seized with great fear and remorse, and, with a perturbed heart, prayed and vowed to God that he would abjure the world and become an ascetic, if only the little cats be saved. So saying, Rakha kept praying to God till the fires went out, and, then taking out one pot after another, he found, to his devout astonishment, the little cats uninjured and in life, in one of the pots. Beside themselves with joy, the gentle Rakha and his wife prepared to fulfil their vow. They gave away to the poor all they had, and, with nothing but the clothes they wore on their person, they embarked on a life of asceticism. They took not to begging but daily went and gathered the wood and the twigs in the forest, and, selling them for a price, maintained them-

selves. We are told that the ascetic Rakha, while daily gathering the fallen twigs and pieces of wood, would touch them not—such was the intense purity of his mind—where they lay in groups, fearing lest some other hand had gathered them for its use.

#### THE LAME SAINT

Another devout soul that figures in Namdev's biography is the Lamé Saint of Paithan. He was a youth, born of poor parents, having *neither hands nor feet*. He was in due course invested with the sacred thread, but, disabled from movement or work, the unfortunate boy lived on the food given him by his kind neighbours. However, as he saw almost every day crowds of pilgrims marching to Pandharpur, his heart too was filled with a desire to see and worship Vittoba. He begged of the pilgrims to take him with them, but they complied not. At last he resolved, lame though he was, to creep on to Pandharpur. And so, across plain and hill, he crept till he reached a village called Lahool, mid-way between Paithan and Pandharpur.

When he reached Lahool, there was only a single day left for the sacred Ekadasi to arrive. Half the journey had yet to be done ; and therefore bereft of all hopes of seeing Pandharpur, the lame youth sank down helpless and dejected.. It is said that Vittoba himself at last appeared at Lahool and vouchsafed the youth his sight.

#### CHOKAMELA

The last to be referred is one of the most gentle and devout souls ever born in Maharashtra and one who had long predeceased Namdev. Chokamela was a Mahar by birth, the lowest of the low. He was born and lived in the city of Pandharpur, where his duty was to drag the bodies of dead cattle from the vicinity of the townsmen's houses. Though a Mahar and fated to low work from birth, his eye of faith early opened and he often prayed and meditated on Vittoba.. He could not enter the temple nor stand in the streets, and therefore prayed continuously to Vishnu from the outer gate.

The thought, however, of a Mahar saint and worshipper was too much for the orthodox and

the high of the day, and as a result bitter persecution befell Chokamela. One day, as Chokamela worshipped Vittoba standing afar, a Brahman scoffed at him and said "Tell me what good are all the prayers you say. You worship Vishnu both day and night; yet you cannot venture into His sight. Your prayers to Him are as a dog should desire to eat with Brahmins. A beggar shall win a royal mate long before you enter Vishnu's heaven." Chokamela, humbly bowing, replied —

"The sun, though parted by unnumbered  
miles,

Still on the lotus sheds his radiant smiles;  
The moon, though high and higher still she  
soars,

Spurns not the passion of the fond *chakor*.  
So too High Heaven's Lord may yet incline,  
Hope of the Hopeless, to this prayer of  
mine.

From far the mother runs her young to  
save,  
From far He sees and shrinks not from the  
slave.

But if He finds no temple in your heart,  
Close to His shrine; you yet are far apart."

That night Vittoba himself came and stood by the saint's cottage-door and bore the Mahar swiftly to His temple-hall. And there placing him in the holiest spot of all, He took the saint's hand in His and told him that his was the worship that had pleased Him best. A temple priest who was sleeping in the outside awoke; and, calling to the other priests, cried "See, Chokamela or some other Mahar sits by Vishnu in the shrine." The saint was seized and dragged through the door; he implored their pardon but all in vain. He said —

"Nay, if a Mahar should bathe in Ganga's  
tide,

Will his pollution in Her stream abide?

Or when the southern wind sweeps over the  
plain,

Is it infected by the outcaste's stain?

The sun's reflection in a pool may lie,

But yet the sun itself leaves not the sky.



Base though I be, no evil have I done  
Him in whose eyes all castes and creeds are  
one."

Chokamela was at last banished from the city and forced to live beyond the Bhima. Though outcasted, he still prayed to his Vittal from where he lived on the other side of the Bhima. Some time after in the year 1332 A.D. the Governor of Bidar impressed all the Mahars in his province to build a protecting wall round Mangalwedha town. Chokamela was impressed along with others. When the work was nearing its end, a part of the unfinished wall crashed down and smothered a number of Mahar workmen. Among the victims was Chokamela himself one.

#### NAMDEV SEEKING THE BONES OF CHOKAMELA

For many years Chokamela's ashes lay unhonoured under the fallen ruin. At last Namdev, it is said, received a divine message from Vittoba to carry them to His temple. In obedience to it, Namdev went to Mangalwedha, but Chokamela's bones were mingled with those

of several hundred fellow-workmen. At first Namdev was at a loss to identify those which he sought. At last placing his ear close to the ground, he heard at one spot the cry of "Vittoba, Vittoba". He then knew that the bones that lay there were Chokamela's. Reverently he collected them, and took them to Pandharpur, where a stone erected over them still marks the earthly remains of the gentle Mahar saint. The anecdote indirectly bears testimony to Namdev's spirit of humanity and his tender reverence for sainthood.

#### NAMDEV'S CHARACTER

In the many anecdotes and incidents of Namdev's life already narrated, we may gather some idea of the great sincerity and faith and the exquisite tenderness of heart and gentility of mind of the Maratha poet. Some more anecdotes are told in his biography which reveal the same beautiful characteristics. Once, on an *Ekadashi* day when the pilgrims were preparing their food in open places round Pandharpur, a dog came on the scene and began to carry away the food they had prepared for

their dinner. The pilgrims took some sticks and pursued, it when the dog entered the house of Namdev, and, seeing some newly-prepared articles of food, put out its mouth. Namdev, friend to all beings, at once took the cakes, and, smearing them with ghee, gave them to the dog. No act of kindness could be greater. It is said that Vittoba himself had assumed this guise of a dog to test the heart of his devotees. Another anecdote is told which is, if at all, more touching and beautiful in its tenderness. Once, Namdev's mother being ill, she asked her son to go and bring her some herbs. Namdev took a blade and went out to bring them. As he, however, stood and cut the plants, the sight of the falling juice brought profound tears into his eyes. Suddenly turning the blade on to his own leg, he made a cut there to see how he himself felt it and taking out a piece of flesh applied it to the sundered plant to help it to revive. As the late Ranade said, "this intense spirituality may sound somewhat unreal to men not brought up in the atmosphere

these saints breathed. But there can be no doubt about the fact and there can also be no doubt that the national ideal of spiritual excellence has been shaped by these models. It may be that a stronger backbone and more resisting power are needed in the times in which we live, but in an account of the saints and prophets as they flourished more than two hundred years ago, we cannot afford to interpolate our own wants and wishes."

#### NAMDEV'S CLOSING DAYS AND DEATH

His devotions apart, Namdev seems to have spent his time largely in preaching and in composing songs. More than three to four thousands of poems bearing his name have come down to us. Most of these poems, as is the case with the poems of the other great poets of this movement, should have been composed extempore in the course of the *bhajans* and *sankirtans*. That Namdev constantly figured in such *bhajans* and congregational meetings is certain. But Mahipathi has left us no detailed descriptions of his daily preachings and *bhajans*, of the

eagerness and ecstasy and love that would have swelled Namdev's utterances or of the vast crowds at Pandhari and elsewhere that would have gathered to hear him. In the lives of Ekanath, Tukaram and Ramdas written by the same poet, we have vivid descriptions of some of the most memorable *bhajans* and meetings they held, of the very men and women who attended them and of the great wave of enthusiasm and religious ecstasy into which they swept whole assemblies of devotees and pilgrims. Perhaps removed by a very long period from the time when Mahipathi came to write the pious lives, the tradition that had gathered round the life and doings of Namdev had faded in parts, while the enthusiasm and the love that attended on the lives of the more recent saints were more fresh in the memory of the people and found their way into the biographies. Be it as it may, Namdev's life could not have been a whit less full of love and devotion and pure ecstasy and charity than that of the 16th and 17th century saints. Living to a pretty good age, some seventy

years, Namdev breathed his last at the very door of his loved temple of Vittoba at Pandharpur. The first step leading to the door of the Vittoba temple at Pandharpur is named after him—a fitting memorial to a saint who helped to lead the souls of men on to the feet of God.

#### NAMDEV'S RELIGION AND POETRY

Namdev, like Tukaram, was more a poet and a mystic than a preacher or the spokesman of any creed. If we may believe the story of his initiation under Vishoba Khesar who was probably a non-idolater and a monist, Namdev should have learnt something of religious theory and philosophy under him. Such as it was, it would have gone to give strength and clearness to Namdev's faith and vision. Namdev's poems, however, little reveal any philosophic theory or speculation. They are, above all, poems of great Devotion and God-love.

The preciousness of the message of Namdev, as that of Tukaram, consists in the fact that it utters with simple sincerity a cry of the heart for God and points out to man the need

of God's Grace. As Ranade says, "the charm of Namdev and Tukaram lies in their appeal to the heart and in the subjective truth of the experiences felt by them in common with all who are religious by nature." Again and again there breaks out in these two singers the authentic call of man's unquenchable desire, "O! that I knew where I might find Him." The abundance and intensity of these expressions of desire and love cannot be adequately realised except by a study of those poems themselves. There are in their poems also notes of praise and God-attainment and eager moods of beatitude and peace. The great governing ideas of these mystics are however derived from the current Vaishnavite faith.

We give below a few poems :—

The first deals with the futility of idol-worship and is incidentally important as containing a reference to the guru Vishoba Khesar and his teaching.

"A stone God never speaks. What possibility then of his removing the disease of mundane existence ?

A stone image is regarded as God, but the true God is wholly different. If a stone God fulfils desires, how is it he breaks when struck ?

Those who adore a God made of stone lose everything through their folly.

Those who say and those who believe that a God of stone speaks to his devotees are both fools. Those who extol the greatness of such a God and call themselves His devotees, should be regarded as worthless persons and their words should not be heard by the ear.

If, by chiselling a stone, a god is made of it and is worshipped with care for many years will he be of use at any time ? Do reflect on this well in your mind.

Whether a holy place is small or large, there is no God but stone or water.

In the village of Dvadasi (Barse) instruction was given that there is no place which is devoid of God. That God was shown to Nama in his heart and thus *Khesar* conferred a blessing on him."

The following poem describes the Omnipotence of God. One may see in it some reflec-



tion of the thought of the old Sanskrit classics. "The Veda has to speak by Thy might and the sun to move round (by it) : such is the might of Thee, the Lord of the Universe ! Knowing this essential truth, I have surrendered myself to Thee.

By Thy might it is that the clouds do pour down rain, mountains rest firm and the wind doth blow.

Nothing moves at all without Thee. O Lord Pandurang, Thou art the cause of all. Namdev, like the other great Vaishnava "mystics" that followed him, condemned fasts and pilgrimages and called on men to cultivate pure faith and love of God. Sin, he says, can be effaced only by repentance and God will manifest Himself only to those who devoutly call on Him.

"Your mind is full of vices. What is the use of the pilgrimages you make ? What is the use of austere practices if there is no repentance ? The sins resulting from a mental act cannot be effaced by the highest of holy places. The essence of the matter is very simple : *Sin is effaced by Repentance.*" So

says Nama; "Vows, fasts and austerities are not at all necessary, nor is it necessary for you to go on a pilgrimage."

"Be you watchful in your hearts and always sing the name of Hari. It is not necessary to give up eating food or drinking water; fix your mind on the feet of Hari. Yoga or sacrificial ceremonies or giving up objects of desire are not wanted. Realise a fondness for the feet of Hari. Neither is it necessary for you to contemplate the *One without Attributes*. Hold to the love of the name of Hari: says Nama, be firm in singing the name and then Pandurang will render Himself manifest to you."

In the two following poems we have a description of the virtuous and holy condition of a real *bhaktha*. Such a one, at peace with himself, cares not for the world's censure or its praise:—

"Recognise him alone to be a righteous man, who sees Vasudera in all objects, eradicating all pride or egoism. The rest are entangled in the shackles of delusion. To

him all wealth is like earth and the nine species of gems are mere stones. The two—desire and anger—he has thrown out and cherishes in his heart quietude and forgiveness. He constantly repeats the name of Govinda not desisting even for a moment.”

“Firmly grasp the truth which is Narayana. Purity of conduct should not be abandoned: one should not be afraid of the censure of the people, and thus accomplish one’s purpose. Surrender yourself to your loving Friend (God) giving up all ostentation and pride. The censure of people should be regarded as praise and their praise should not be heeded. One should entertain no longing for being respected and honoured, but should nourish in oneself a liking for devotion. This should be rendered firm in the mind and the name of God should not be neglected even for a moment.”

The two following poems, so full of subtle beauty, will be familiar to students of mystic poetry:—

He is one, but fills and encompasses

many. Wherever you look, you find Him there. There is scarcely one who understands Him all being deluded by the variegated picture drawn by Maya. Everything is Govind, everything is Govind, there is nothing without Govind. Just as there is one thread and on it are woven breadthwise and lengthwise hundreds of thousands of beads, so is everything woven in the Lord. The waves, the foam and the bubbles of water are not different from water. All this extent of the universe is the sport of Parabrahm and, when we think of It, is not different from It. Illusive objects and objects seen in dreams are regarded as real. When by the instruction of my guru my mind awoke, I accepted the truth. Reflecting in your mind see this all to be the creation of Hari, says Namdev; in the inside of every individual thing there is one Murari alone without any interstice."

"The pitcher is filled and the water brought to bathe the God. There were forty-two hundreds of thousands of beings in it; there was already Vittal in them. Whom shall I

bathe? Wherever we go, there is Vittal and He ever sports in joy. Flowers have been brought and wreaths woven of them for worshipping God. First of all the flowers were smelt by the bees, there was Vittal there; what shall I do? Milk has been brought and cooked for the offering of *Kshir* to God. The milk was first tasted by the calf; in it was Vittal, what shall I do? Here is Vittal, there is Vittal, no world without Vittal. This place and that Thou hast filled. Thou hast filled the whole world, says Nama humbly."

Few poems in Marathi, except perhaps some of Tukaram, can match the following in their intense spiritual yearning and their cry for God's grace.

Why dost Thou leave me suffering?

O haste and come, my God and King.

I die unless Thou succour bring.

O haste and come, my God and King.

To help me is a trifling thing.

Yet Thou must haste, my God and King.

O come : (How Nama's clamours ring).

O haste and come, my God and King.

Another is more beautiful :—

O God, my cry comes up to Thee,

How sad a cry is it !

What is this tragic destiny

That Fate for me has writ ?

Wherefore, O Hrisikes, dost Thou

So lightly pass me by ?

To whom, to whom but to Thee now

Can I lift up my cry ?

As chiming anklets sweetly ring,

So rings Thy name abroad ;

To human spirits hungering

Thou givest peace with God.

Thou on Thy shoulders carrying

All the world's load of care,

To Thee 'tis such a little thing

Thy trouble too to bear !

Ah, Pandurang, Thy hand withhold,

My mother dear Thou art.

My Nanna, waxing very bold,

Casts him upon Thy heart.

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
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